United Nations A/71/995

General Assembly

Distr.: General
26 July 2017

Original: English

Seventy-first session
Agenda item 68
Promotion and protection of human rights

Letter dated 26 July 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to convey to you information on the role of a unique civil society institution in Uzbekistan, *mahalla*, in the promotion and protection of human rights in our country (see annex).

I would appreciate it if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 68.

(*Signed*) Bakhtiyor **Ibragimov**

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Annex to the letter dated 26 July 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: Russian]

The *mahalla* — a unique civil society institution in Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, the *mahalla* dates back to ancient times as a powerful seat of culture, an effective citizens' self-governing body, the entity closest to the people and a unique civil society institution. The role and significance of *mahallas* has always been invaluable in carefully preserving the multi-ethnic Uzbek people's national and universal human values, culture, way of life, thoughts and spirituality that have been passed down for generations.

It was during the years of independence that, for the first time in the history of the nation State, citizens' assemblies were enshrined in article 105 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan as territorial self-government units. The participation of self-governing bodies in specific areas of public life has been regulated in over 100 laws and regulations, as part of implementing the concept "from a strong State to a strong civil society".

Over the past five years alone, laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan have been adopted and implemented on citizens' self-governing bodies and on elections of the chairman (*aqsaqal*) of a citizens' assembly and his advisers, as well as some 20 provisions relating to the work of *mahallas* and their public bodies. Skills development training courses have been held for workers in this sector. A popular educational television channel called *Mahalla* has been produced and a popular mass-circulated newspaper *Mahalla* has also been published.

In order to establish the organizational and legal framework for *mahallas* and to enhance the legal culture and skills of employees within citizens' self-governing bodies, the *Mahalla* public charity foundation was established in 1992. It has an extensive network of subdivisions operating in each district and town of Uzbekistan. Over the past 25 years, the foundation has been performing a range of tasks aimed at integrating *mahallas* into modern democratic society, specifically helping to improve the organizational framework of *mahallas*, expanding their functions and ensuring their close cooperation with the public and administrative authorities.

Today, some 10 thousand citizens' assemblies operating in our country are successfully performing over 30 socially and economically significant tasks that had previously been carried out by the local government authorities.

As noted by the President of Uzbekistan, Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the State attaches particular importance to effectively harnessing the opportunities provided by *mahallas*, enhancing the legal culture in society and strengthening respect for the law among citizens. The *mahalla* is set to become an even more efficient body offering real assistance to the people, a "window of justice" and a place where people can express their views and outline their proposals and problems, which undoubtedly will further strengthen the people's trust in the State.

The decree of the President of Uzbekistan on measures for the further improvement of the *mahalla* institution, dated 3 February 2017, marked the beginning of a new phase in the development of this system. The *mahalla* institution is being successfully improved to meet modern needs.

In accordance with this decree, the following five priority areas have been identified to further improve the *mahalla* institution:

Strengthening the place and role of citizens' self-governing bodies in society and transforming them into local entities that provide real assistance to people;

Further improving the relevance and authority of *mahallas* in creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, kindness and charity, fostering social cohesion and preserving and developing national and universal human values;

Bolstering cooperation between citizens' self-governing bodies and governmental and non-governmental organizations in raising young people who are physically and mentally healthy;

Expanding the direct involvement of *mahallas* in ensuring public order and safety, the early reporting of offences and increased respect for the law among citizens;

Introducing effective mechanisms in order to protect rights and legitimate interests, coordinate the work of citizens' self-governing bodies and ensure common law enforcement practice within the *mahalla* system.

In accordance with the above decree, the national coordination council of citizens' self-governing bodies has been granted legal personality. Its subdivisions are formed by councils in the Republic of Karakalpakstan and in the city of Tashkent, as well as provincial, district and municipal councils.

In order to implement the main tasks and new norms approved by the decree, a programme of comprehensive measures is being implemented that includes specific activities to further improve the work of the councils and provide support for citizens' self-governing bodies.

In order to upgrade the facilities of citizens' self-governing bodies, children's playgrounds have been built and lifestyle amenities developed for *mahallas* under territorial programmes for the period 2017-2021. By 1 December 2018, measures will be taken to build "*mahalla* centre" model projects in districts and towns.

A modern "*mahalla* centre" complex has separate rooms with furniture, computers and relevant reading materials for the *mahalla* chairman, secretary, consultants, advisers and crime prevention officer. "*Mahalla* centre" projects also include facilities that shape the lives of modern citizens such as tea rooms, bakeries, beauty salons, shops, sports grounds and children's playgrounds.

Today the *kengash* [committee] of citizens' assemblies is a fine-tuned mechanism that includes the chairman, advisers to the chairman on elderly, veteran and youth affairs, consultants, the executive secretary, the adviser to the citizens' assembly on questions of religious education and spiritual and moral upbringing, the head of the "*Mahalla* posobni" public organization, the local crime prevention inspectors, and also the heads of educational institutions and rural health centres (family clinics) located in the territories of citizens' assemblies.

Citizens' self-governing bodies have commissions that successfully cover the following main areas of work of the citizens' assemblies: reconciliation; education and spirituality; social support; work with women; children, youth and sports; the development of entrepreneurship and family businesses; the environment, nature conservation, landscaping and greening; and public oversight and consumer protection. Depending on the urgency of the issues in the territory concerned, a citizens' assembly may also set up other commissions pertaining to its main areas of activity.

In the context of the "Year of Dialogue with the People and Human Interests" initiated by the President of Uzbekistan, Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, *mahalla* leaders and activists are engaged in law making and in work related to preventing offences,

enhancing legal awareness among the public, especially youth and women, assisting socially vulnerable segments of the population, promoting physical culture, sport and healthy living, organizing recreation for boys and girls and protecting the environment. The teaching of entrepreneurship skills and the use of e-Government services are particular areas of focus.

Public oversight by citizens' self-governing bodies, concerning enforcement and effective implementation by government authorities of their duties to resolve urgent public issues, plays an important role in providing meaningful feedback between society and the State and in further improving the social and spiritual atmosphere in families and *mahallas*.

In all of this work, citizens' self-governing bodies and the *Mahalla* public charity foundation cooperate actively with Youth Union of Uzbekistan, the Women's Committee, the Nuronii Foundation for the public support of veterans and other civic organizations.

Uzbekistan has put into practice the principle that the entire *mahalla* is responsible for each child. All the strengths and capabilities of the State and society are mobilized to educate young people in a spirit of national and universal values. In this task, government bodies rely on *mahallas*, whose assets include veterans and mothers with tremendous life experience, knowledge and spiritual capacity. The numerous sporting events organized by *mahallas* help boys and girls to grow physically strong and healthy.

The *mahalla iftihori* badge was established in July 2017 and will be awarded to proactive citizens and representatives of civic institutions that have made a worthy contribution to implementing the tasks entrusted to the citizens' self-governing bodies.

Today the Uzbek *mahalla* is a seat of learning. Libraries are gradually being organized in buildings of citizens' assemblies, for example, with *mahalla* bibliophile weeks held on site. *Mahalla* centres have libraries that are well stocked with books, including e-books, as well as computers with Internet access. This is important in organizing substantive leisure activities for people and enhancing a culture of reading among young people.

Community councils dealing with relations between families, *mahallas* and schools and "parents' universities", whereby parents assume their responsibility for protecting their child, help teachers in the education of children, increase the role of parents in the child development process, and bring together schools and families in preventing pupils from developing harmful habits. Parents, health-care professionals and educators systematically discuss and develop collective solutions to problems of concern to young people and young families.

The modern Uzbek *mahalla* functions like a genuine school of democracy and lives as one family. *Mahalla* leaders and activists are informed about the status, successes and challenges of each family. They spread the message of cohesion and harmony. That is why people join citizens' assemblies, share their views and proposals, and discuss and find solutions to their concerns.

Ancient and forever young, the Uzbek *mahalla* is the common home of ethnically diverse representatives. Inter-ethnic harmony within citizens' assemblies and the further strengthening of friendship, cohesion and mutual respect are important for enhancing the independence and development of the nation and the well-being of its people.

The 2017-2021 strategy of action on five priority areas for the development of the Republic of Uzbekistan, adopted in February 2017, seeks to strengthen the role

of non-governmental, community-based organizations and local self-governing bodies, including the relevance and effectiveness of the *mahalla* institution in public administration. That task has been carried out successfully.

The current experience of Uzbekistan reaffirms the validity of this unique institution for independent action whereby citizens address issues of local significance based on their interests, historical development characteristics, national and spiritual values, and local customs and traditions. *Mahallas* are successfully engaged in democratic transformations based on the following principles: the rule of law; the precedence of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of individuals; democracy; openness; social justice; autonomy in local decision-making; public recourse; social partnership; and respect for local customs and traditions.

Thanks to the *mahalla* Uzbekistan has, for centuries, developed and maintained specific principles for the population governing their social and economic behaviour, respect for community values and ethical relationships, which guarantees that they unconditionally fulfil their commitments and responsibilities to society. All of this, alongside high levels of trust between citizens in *mahallas*, is a prerequisite for the formation of civil society.

Today the experience of the *mahalla*, as a unique institution for building a democratic State and forming a strong civil society, can be used effectively in other countries that are moving towards democracy.